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**Institutionalizing public engagement through research in UK universities:
Perceptions, predictions and paradoxes concerning the state of the art.**

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Introduction

While a number of recent studies into public engagement (PE) activity in higher education (HE) contexts have focused on the relationship between PE and research, academic practice, identity, career progression and an impact agenda, these have mainly consulted the opinion of academics (cf. Watermeyer 2011; 2012a,b; 2015a,b; Watermeyer and Lewis 2015). Fewer studies, if any at all, have considered the state of the art of PE from the perspective of dedicated professional service (support and administrative) staff working within UK universities. Yet this perspective is necessary in securing a more complete understanding of the way with which PE has become 'institutionalized' (Pinheiro 2015), particularly at an operational level. Furthermore, it provides an alternative aspect from which to survey changes – and the complexity and contradiction of these – in the governance, organization and aspirations of UK universities. The focus accordingly herein, is on the perceptions and projections of university professional service staff on the current and future state and status of PE in the specific context of the UK's HE sector.

'Sociological' new institutionalism (cf. Meyer and Rowan 2006; Powell and DiMaggio 1991) provides a useful theoretical lens through which to consider not so much the organization of PE within universities but PE as one mission among many (cf. Enders and de Boer 2010) that contributes to and reinforces the contemporary organizational paradigm of higher education, which is typically associated with 'new managerialism' (Deem, Hillyard and Reed 2007; Lynch, Grummel and Devine 2012) and 'academic capitalism' (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). From this purview, the way with which PE is formally 'administered' within universities, most often at a distance and decoupled from academic research and by individuals or small teams working in the capacity of academic support staff, reveals something of the way with which it has become institutionally sequestered, regulated and defined. It also reveals a tension between PE as something academics freely (choose to) do and PE as something that is a work-based expectation subject to institutional control and review. While some have pointed to PE being habitually low on the ladder of universities' institutional priorities, relative to other activities such as teaching and research (cf. Watermeyer 2015), an investment in 'supporting' PE, if only sparse, may be seen as analogous to the way with which academics are 'supported' within the context of research; specifically in procuring external research funds and competitive status within national and international performance league tables.

The ontological basis of universities, what as Stefan Collini (2012) asks, they are *for*, is increasingly defined by the dual and interlinking challenges of educational marketization (cf. Bok, 2003) and globalization (cf. Marginson, King and Naidoo 2013); the influence of new public management technologies (cf. Christensen and Lægreid 2011); and an overall fiscal and/or neoliberal rationalization of higher education (cf. Giroux 2014; Olssen and Peters 2005). The legitimacy of PE, as a part of the university mission, may therefore be confirmed or rejected on the basis of its contribution to delivering 'positional goods' (Hirsch 1976) and facilitating universities in meeting the needs and demands of their external stakeholders (cf. de Boer, Enders and Schimank 2007).

In the present milieu, PE is characterized by considerable variation in the way and extent to which it has been institutionalized. It is observable as a smorgasbord or patchwork of different, sometimes unrelated activities, initiatives and programmes with various intentions and unequal status and presence across UK universities. It may have the appearance of ‘corporate’ social responsibility perhaps even educational philanthropy and public goodwill, yet be motivated by an altogether more self-serving agenda. Nevertheless, there are strong clues to suggest a changing landscape for and the harmonization of PE across the UK’s HE sector. This is no more so apparent than where PE is increasingly co-opted and configured as an expression of societal and economic impact, *prospectively* as statements within research funding applications made by researchers to the UK’s research funding councils (RCUK), and *retrospectively* in the context of impact case studies submitted to the UK’s national research evaluation exercise, the Research Excellence Framework (REF)¹ (cf. Watermeyer and Olssen 2016).

However, the implications of an impact agenda for PE in HE are not exclusively positive. In the first instance, where PE is increasingly symptomatic of higher education’s bureaucratization and an indivisible part of its performance and audit culture (cf. Shore and Wright, 1999) and ‘competition fetish’ (Naidoo 2016), then its legitimacy will be secured but its diversity and inclusiveness compromised. It will ostensibly become another aspect of the overall homogenization of higher education and a further form of what DiMaggio and Powell (1983) recognize as ‘coercive institutional isomorphism’. The tragedy in this particular future imagining of PE in UK university contexts is, as will be discussed, the narrowing and instrumentalizing of its operational basis and ideological vision in complementing performance-based obligations and the rejection of richer, if more nebulous conceptualizations of PE, particularly those predicated not on economic terms but social ideals of justice, equality and diversity. In this imagining, what some see as the crisis of the public university (cf. Holmwood 2011) becomes entrenched, with PE not only robbed of its distinction as a catalyst for positive social change but recast as an instrument for occupational conformity. Worse still is a sense that PE where hijacked by the terms of impact articulated by RCUK and the REF will cause the exaggeration of ‘the gaze’ not of the public but managerial governmentality (cf. Cartwright and Sturken 2001; Zipin and Brennan 2004) and the panopticism academics are alleged to suffer in the neoliberal Academy (cf. Miller and Sabapathy 2011). Conversely, in a second framing there lies a tacit and nascent potential for regulatory mechanisms like the REF to facilitate a more innovative and dynamic culture for PE in university settings. Where PE is conceptualized and undertaken on the terms of ‘reward and recognition’, the motivations and intentions of its academic protagonists may be far from ‘virtuous’ (cf. Nixon 2008) and more common to ‘playing the game’ (Lucas 2006). Yet despite such self-serving rationalizations, the potential for PE to mobilize ‘transformative

¹ The REF is a performance based funding system through which the allocation of approximately £1.6billion of Government funding to UK universities is made. REF 2014 was the successor to the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) last undertaken in 2008 and featured a new component of research evaluation – impact – where researchers were asked to provide narrative case-studies of the economic and societal impact of their research. Impact constituted 20% of REF2014, which also comprised research outputs (65%) and research environment (15%)

change', 'reach' and 'significance' – qualifiers of excellent impact in the REF (cf. Watermeyer 2014) – may augment. So what then, we asked a cohort of university professional service staff as public engagement 'professionals', is the current and future state and status of PE in UK universities?

Methodology

We designed, piloted and refined an online survey in late 2015, focusing on two simple open-text questions:

- What do you perceive to be the *current* state and status of public engagement in UK universities?
- What do you perceive to be the *future* state and status of public engagement in UK universities?

We also included a profiling section, which asked only where respondents worked, for example a university or science centre, and the nature of their role. To incentivize participation in the survey and further protect the anonymity of participants, where the population of university based PE specialists in the UK is relatively modest and interconnected, we intentionally avoided asking respondents to disclose their institutional affiliation. The accounts presented herein are not, therefore, differentiated by institutional type though we acknowledge a correlation between operational variance in PE and differences of institutional focus, infrastructure and location. We also recognise within PE a broad range of activities connected to an assortment of different kinds of professional service roles in universities. A further intentional omission was profiling and subsequent segmentation of respondents by social determinants such as age or gender, though it subsequently became apparent that there is a conspicuous gender dimension to the PE in HE support role. We also avoided providing any guidance related to meanings of PE or imposing our own ideas of what PE is or might be taken to be.

Knowing our target audience, we undertook purposive sampling and used the delegate list of the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement 2014 national conference to identify potential respondents who numbered approximately n=320. We also distributed the survey online using the PSCI.com mailing list dedicated to UK science communication and public engagement practitioners. The survey returned 90 completed responses. Given our intended focus on exploring the role and identities of professional service staff working in PE in UK HE contexts we omitted all those working outside of UK universities or who had roles that were other than administrative or of a support-capacity. Consequently, surveys returned from academic staff working in UK universities were also discounted leaving us with 72 responses, which are represented within our discussion as excerpts (E1-25) that encompass both questions. In the context of these responses it is pertinent to note that despite what we have already alluded to as the diversity of PE in HE contexts, we encountered a privileging, perhaps even a monopolizing of a paradigm of PE as an activity servicing academic research. Consequently, our discussion is limited to a consideration of PE through research and makes no account of other aspects of universities' PE portfolio, such as for instance student community volunteering.

Nonetheless, we take this kind of albeit inadvertent biasing to signify the dominance or higher-visibility of a paradigm of PE through research within universities in the UK.

We employed an inductive approach to analysing the responses to the two qualitative and open-ended questions and subsequently coded our data into three substantive categories that respondents attributed as factors affecting the current and future state and status of PE in UK universities: (i) public engagement in the context of the Research Excellence Framework (REF); (ii) public engagement in the context of Research Council United Kingdom (RCUK) funding; and (iii) public engagement as a professionalized role within university support services. In the latter context of the professionalization of PE, we were also able to draw from survey responses a sense of what is necessary for further and future embedding of PE. We did not, however, seek to establish any kind of statistical significance from the data. Our intention instead was to capture the richness of first-hand narrative accounts of PE 'professionals'. However, in the specific context of exploring the relationship between PE and the REF, we did make use of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) REF impact case study database to draw some statistical conclusions.

Findings

In the first instance, respondents articulated complementarity in the way academics and support staff conceptualize challenges of PE in UK universities. They referred to the variable status of PE as it occurs within a higher education system, itself responding to pressures of marketization, neoliberalization (cf. Peck and Tickell 2002) and the proliferation of performance and audit cultures. They also suggested that a rationalization of what academics do is increasingly fiscally oriented and justified in the terms of performance evaluation. Respondents, consequently reflected on PE existing as more of a peripheral rather than central aspect of the academic portfolio and one also aligned more to administrative than academic labour and/or to those who Whitchurch (2012) designates as 'third space' professionals. Yet even in the latter context, they made comment that the status of PE as an administrative activity is blurry and hindered by the lack of an agreed definition of function and attributed dearth of institutional status and professional esteem. Indeed, the variety of ways that respondents communicated their professional role: 'REF administrator'; 'outreach co-ordinator'; 'communications manager'; 'community liaison manager'; 'cultural partnership manager'; and 'public engagement with research manager' can be taken to confirm the granularity of PE in the professional services context. Concurrently and conversely, their accounts converge upon and are dominated by a paradigm of PE most attuned to the last of these roles, which is explicitly about engagement of research. Indeed most of the accounts are bounded, perhaps almost indiscriminately, by a vision of PE as an activity servicing more operational and less altruistic needs and as specific to research governance.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, respondents made an explicit association between PE and academics undertaking and evidencing impact-related activity. The UK's REF is thus understandably elicited as a major factor rationalizing the need for PE professional

services staff; a sentiment supported by evidence of PE featuring pervasively across REF impact case studies. Paradoxically, the REF is also alluded to as a factor motivating a need for more innovative forms of PE practice. However, despite the significance of PE where contextualized in relation to the REF, respondents commented that issues in funding and support for PE activity in universities together with a lack of availability of training and skills in PE; low rates of pay; short-term contracts; and occupational precariousness, collectively contribute to unevenness in the quality and extent of PE across and within UK universities.

PE in the REF context

The significance of the relationship between an impact agenda for higher education and PE undertaken by academics in UK universities, particularly as it has unfolded in the context of REF2014, has been well observed (cf. Watermeyer 2015b). However, whilst an early suggestion that the incorporation of impact in REF2014 would significantly increase the value attributed to PE activity by academics and their institutions, many academics, particularly those at the vanguard of the UK's university PE community, felt that PE as a type of 'soft' impact would be deselected in university's institutional REF submissions in preference for 'harder' forms (habitually economic) of impact that were more likely to invoke the largesse of sub-panel academic reviewers.

What is now known subsequent to REF2014 is that despite firm indication from HEFCE that PE should not be counted as a form of impact, PE was a conspicuous feature of many impact case studies. A simple search of HEFCE's REF impact case-study database using the term 'public engagement' reveals that of 6,637 documents submitted by UK universities to REF2014, 4871 case studies are reported as featuring PE. In the context of social science disciplines or those units of assessment comprising Main Panel C, this segments further to 1606 case studies. In the context of the education sub-panel 26 and sociology sub-panel 23, our home disciplines, this relates to 163 and 92 case studies, respectively. When looked at from the perspective of our two (research intensive) institutions, the universities of Bath and Cardiff, this equates to 28 and 59 case studies featuring PE from a possible 56 and 90, respectively submitted to REF2014. In other words, in the context of the universities of Bath and Cardiff, PE featured in 50% and 66% of their respective REF2014 impact submissions. Table 1 segments the distribution of PE across impact case studies further and reveals that PE featured most prominently in societal, cultural and technological impact types and most predominantly in Main Panel C. Curiously, PE featured less across Main Panel B, which included the majority of STEM based subject disciplines for which it has so traditionally been associated; most frequently in the form of science communication (cf. Gregory and Miller 1998). In fact, PE featured in almost twice as many impact case studies submitted in social science and arts and humanities disciplines (Main Panels C and D) than in the life and physical sciences (Main Panels A and B). In the context of research subject area, PE is most represented across impact case studies located in the medical and health sciences; studies in human society; and language, communication and culture. In the context of research funding, the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) features

most prominently amongst the group of RCUK funders as a sponsor of research producing impact featuring public engagement.

Table 1. PE within REF2014 impact case studies (n= number of case studies)

UoA Main Panels with impact case studies featuring PE	Impact Types (Upper Percentiles only)	Research Subject Areas (Upper percentiles only)	Project Funders (Upper percentiles of RCUK funders only)
Main Panel A: n=1006	Societal: n=1472	Medical and Health Sciences: n=1532	Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) n=762
Main Panel B: n=756	Cultural: n=1042	Studies in Human Society: n=1145	Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) n=673
Main Panel C: n=1606	Technological: n=610	Language Communication and Culture: n=1037	Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) n=522
Main Panel D: n=1505	Health: n=564	History and Archaeology: n=938	Medical Research Council (MRC) n=315

We may, therefore, confidently surmise that the link between academics' undertaking PE and impact as an iteration of performance evaluation in the REF is strong. Quite the extent of PE in the next REF exercise – predicted to occur in 2021 – if impact is to remain and if as is speculated exists as a more pronounced aspect of assessment, is open to debate. However, it is hard to imagine that the kinds of representations of PE in impact case studies will radically change; certainly for the social science and arts and humanities disciplines whose researchers appear inherently predisposed to a 'public' interface. In any event, what these figures make explicit is the centrality of PE to academic practice in the terms of research and perhaps more importantly from an institutional perspective, academic performance.

This kind of sentiment was echoed by our survey respondents who in a post-REF2014 context, identified impact in the REF as a major motivator for PE in universities and its increased professionalization. They intimated that in moving towards the next REF, PE practice in UK universities might need to become more sophisticated and of a higher quality to better fulfil the increased expectations of impact peer-reviewers and user-assessors²:

² Currently five years away from the next anticipated REF, there is no firm sense of who REF panel members will be and whether these will be a similar cohort to those who populated the panels of REF2014. Indeed, there is no clear statement that there will be a next REF. But presuming there is, evaluating impact in REF terms will constitute a new experience though guidelines for impact evaluation in REF2020/21 will likely be more developed and incorporate learning from REF2014's impact assessment.

Public engagement is being done to a higher quality than previously . . . the status of PE has improved, particularly as it is being linked to REF. (Excerpt 1, E1)

I believe that there is positivity in the air for the next REF and the role PE will play. (E2)

It's assuming an increasingly prominent part in Higher Education with more and more universities considering and endorsing it at a strategic level, partly as a result of the impact agenda, partly through promotion by funders like the Wellcome Trust and partly through advocacy of national organisations, especially the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement. (E3)

Viewed positively, REF is seen as a source for re-imagining and re-purposing public engagement. Innovativeness in such context was seen by respondents to be vital, where existing methods were considered both stale and unappealing:

It's [- PE-] gaining more importance, though feels somewhat fatigued with current methods like science/art collaborations that are beginning to feel [out]dated. (E4)

As PE secures more coherence and stabilizes as an academic activity, some respondents claimed a more strategic approach to PE is required utilising new technologies and new ways of engaging various public groups:

We are utilising different types of PE vehicles (particularly digital platforms) as alternatives to the more 'traditional' school outreach programmes. There has been progress and the (small) research centre I work for has a much more visible presence online, and we plan our activities in a much more strategic way and prioritise audiences and activities. (E5)

Others, however, opined that PE's inherent eclecticism presented organizational challenges:

Public engagement spans a diverse range of meanings and activities . . . This breadth is exciting but occasionally unwieldy for those of us working in it, sharing it, planning it and trying to consider future strategies for it. (E6)

Some respondents commented that where PE was being operationalized to complement an institution's impact needs and/or performance based strategy, it was losing a creative and critical edge. A similar effect has been observed in the performance evaluation of research and teaching (cf. Watermeyer and Olssen 2016):

Whilst it is good that the idea of involving the public has become more accepted and resourced, this work needs to maintain an experimental and fluid edge that mainstreaming may blunt. (E7)

Others still, felt that an impact agenda had hijacked the significance of PE:

Although usually there can't be any impact without some form of engagement with one's research, the term engagement does not carry as much weight as 'impact'. (E8)

It might of course be argued that the value of PE has only risen where associated with impact in the terms of performance evaluation. Were this association not to be made and were there to be no role for PE in the REF, its rationalization as a part of the academic portfolio and as organized for instance in work allocation models, would surely weaken, as have many other aspects of academic citizenship (cf. Macfarlane 2015). In other words, the future of PE in HE and for that matter its current status, depends upon its correlation to performance management and the extent to which it might be institutionalized, professionalized and, therefore, evaluated. For PE to be taken seriously by institutions, it must necessarily form a part of HE's fiscal rationalization whether that be as a marketing and recruitment device or as expressed here, a pathway to measurable and remunerated impact. We might further conjecture that PE as an expression of academic altruism may be ideologically justified but is redundant to the organizational strategies of institutional managers and academic administrators and what they perceive as necessary to ensuring the competitiveness of their universities in a national and international market economy of HE.

PE in REF terms would, therefore, appear to be an activity undertaken by academics and supported by professional support staff primarily for the purpose of mobilizing and harvesting impact:

There are many now wanting to know how to evaluate activities with an eye to having evidence for future REF case studies. (E9)

PE in the RCUK context

While the REF was considered by respondents to be an enabler of PE activity, the vagaries of the UK's research funding system embodied with the UK research funding councils (RCUK), were seen to significantly handicap the profile and potential of PE as an academic activity. Respondents for instance identified a discontinuation of ring-fenced funding for PE – on the basis of an alleged perception from RCUK of it already being sufficiently embedded within institutional cultures – as detrimental to the way with which it was perceived and prioritised by researchers, particularly in the context of research funding applications. Furthermore, respondents such as in E10, argued that collapsing support for PE into the mandatory 'pathways to impact statements' of RCUK funding applications, reflected not only the strategic response of funding councils to continuing austerity in the distribution of public funds and an erroneous belief that PE was firmly nested in institutional culture, but coterminously the devaluation and instrumentalization of PE to an impact generating function. Others stated, such as in E11, that the growing scarcity of dedicated funding sources for PE was resulting in a lost-opportunity to consolidate and build upon good practice.

Funding councils sent out a message that PE was now “embedded” in the research process and should therefore be funded exclusively via Pathways to Impact. In line with this, research councils (with the exception of STFC) ended their dedicated PE schemes. This decision coincided with a previous Comprehensive Spending Review, so I hope it isn’t unduly cynical to see this move as a way of managing, and being seen to manage a more constrained budget with a more strategic-sounding commitment to “impact”. I can say with some assuredness that public engagement with research is not seriously considered as part of the research process by most grant applicants and is very far from anything that could reasonably be described as embedded . . . (E10)

While the benefits and rationale for PE are well understood within the HE sector, efforts to build on current activities are stymied by a highly restrictive funding environment. (E11)

Overall, where the visibility of PE within researching funding processes was seen by respondents to have diminished, they suggested that funding applicants were correspondingly neglecting to fully account for (the cost of) PE in their research plans and, therefore, forgoing an opportunity with which to fully maximize and exploit its potential value:

The costing of PE activity in grant proposals is often forgotten. However, when it is included in the grant, much good quality, grassroots PE is being accomplished and evaluated. (E12)

PE is well documented for being resource demanding and not inexpensive (cf. Stilgoe and Wilsdon 2009). However, as respondents seem to suggest, a ‘half-way’ approach to its funding is neither helpful to the extent to which it can engender positive change nor the extent to which it is perceived by members of the HE community as a catalyst for such. The way in which PE may be constructed and construed in the specific context of RCUK ‘Pathways to Impact’ statements is also further disadvantaged by ambivalence from academics (authors and reviewers) regarding the evaluative worth of such declarations (cf. Chubb and Watermeyer 2016). Furthermore, for PE professional services staff, access to such funding is off-limits where its intended recipients are more or less exclusively academic. PE in such terms is organised to be more academically, less administratively led; an arrangement other than the dominant paradigm observed in UK universities.

Professionalization and institutional resourcing

The institutionalization of PE in both REF and RCUK contexts, was seen by respondents as spokespersons and practitioners of ‘third-mission’ activity (cf. Laredo 2007), to hinge on the proliferation and professionalization of a cadre of university engagement specialists. These were perceived – and in part self-reflects – as a specific type of higher education professional, neither generalist support staff nor academics with general interest in PE but quasi-academics or ‘boundary walkers’

arguably 'lost in the third space' (Watermeyer 2015b) of HE. These were also a cadre who respondents perceived as leveraging increased legitimacy and recognition within institutional contexts, albeit as distinct from typical forms of institutional capital (see E13). However, as illustrated within E14, the growing abundance and visibility of such types was also considered by respondents to simultaneously confirm the relevance of PE as a facet of university life and potentially dilute its potency as a catalyst of change where it became institutionally grounded, rationalised and regulated. This specific observation is, as a statement verging on self-sabotage, strikingly revealing of a sense of foreboding of the deleterious effects of 'incorporation':

The emergence of academic support staff with full time roles as public engagers has definitely improved things. It also leads to alternative careers for PhD qualified candidates . . . University structures are still heavily weighted in favour of publications and grants as a means of judging career progress. However, the introduction of career routes such as Knowledge Exchange as a separate track may do something to address the prestige problem. (E13)

I think we are seeing the emergence of a new class of HE worker, the public engagement professional. This mainstreaming is both welcome and a threat. (E14)

Iterations of PE professionalization, especially as enabled through culture change initiatives across UK universities were, however, regarded by respondents to be historically imbalanced with the subsequent effect of variation in institutional PE cultures:

There are discrepancies between institutions. Those that received Catalyst/Beacon funding are miles ahead in terms of embedding PE into the culture of the institution. This leaves everyone else scrabbling and trying to convince upper management that this is something worth doing! (E15)

The vast majority, almost ninety per cent of respondents were of the notion that the PE professional service role lacked a clear and agreed definition – particularly in reference to cognate knowledge and skill sets – and was performed by different kinds of people, across different institutions, and for different reasons; a view confirmed by the diversity of PE job titles declared by and represented within our respondent sample. A major concern voiced was that designated PE support staff working in universities often lacked experience and expertise of organizing and managing successful PE programmes. They were, furthermore, frequently distinguished by respondents, as in E16, for being young; lacking necessary qualifications; and as being poorly paid; characteristics frequently attributed to third space professionals. Some suggested, such as in E16, that the PE support role was sometimes even (re)distributed to and enacted by generalist – and already in-post – administrative staff and intimated that the ease by which such assignment occurred de-valued PE as a craft and skill. Fundamentally, whilst PE support staff were seen to

have gained institutional recognition for being a legitimate part of most universities' professional services, respondents felt that the extent of their professional esteem was low:

I worry about the professional status of those involved in PE. Pay for these roles is often very low, and as a result attracts younger and relatively inexperienced people. I'm not sure how to address this - a professional body? More formal courses offering post grad qualifications in PE? Better pay? Greater level of experience required? I think this issue needs greater consideration than it is currently getting, and directly impacts the status of PE in UK institutions. (E16)

Support for PE is very variable, even within HEIs and the skill set of PE support staff is not always recognised, with roles often done by administrative staff alongside other responsibilities rather than hiring an experienced PE practitioner. (E17)

A further majority of respondents suggested considerable variation in the kinds of investment being made in supporting PE activity across different institutions, contributing to an overall patchiness in the quality and overall professionalism of organizational support for PE in UK HE:

I think it is highly variable between universities - some have well-established support and are recognising the importance, whereas others are slower to adopt this. I think a particular challenge is to get the recognition across the sector. (E18)

Currently I think it is a patchwork. Some institutions recognise its value and supply core funding, others tolerate it and it survives on a shoestring, good will and networks. (E19)

Co-incidentally in the process of distributing our online survey we discovered that significant numbers of prospective respondents were on short-term contracts; reflecting an overall trend of labour casualization in HE contexts. We received a large number of automatically generated e-mail responses that indicated that the intended recipient of our invitation had left their post as a consequence of exhausted grant funding. This theme of short-termism was revisited in survey responses where respondents complained that while investments in university PE had been made, these investments were now in decline with much rich learning, expertise and momentum squandered:

At the university level, various strategic initiatives (e.g. Beacons, Catalysts etc.) have brought PE up the agenda. These initiatives have provided some opportunities to create genuine cultural change, and their impact has definitely been noticeable in terms of the breadth and ambition of PE undertaken by academics who are game for that kind of thing. Institutional strategic commitment has been essential in sanctioning these changes.

However, recent developments amongst some of the Beacon universities suggest that this work is easily undone. For example, the former Cardiff Beacon has lost its original (and highly experienced) PE staff following restructuring as has UCL. UCL, in particular, did ground-breaking and exemplary work for institutional PE, so the departure of both of their excellent PE staff just as a restructuring takes place does not suggest an environment that is supportive of, or understands what is required to maintain the progress they had made. It is also worth noting that staff from each of these institutions left to become freelance. Of course, there are many ways to interpret this, but one reading of the situation is that academia isn't exactly bursting with opportunities for PE staff to apply and extend their expertise. (E20)

Across the various survey responses we collated there was an attitude that while efforts to embed PE in UK universities had opened up the possibility of an alternative university career pathway and HE 'professional' role, this pathway was hindered by the same kind of occupational precariousness suffered by early career researchers and a corresponding lack of institutional recognition and support that was seen to befall academics with enthusiasm for and profile in undertaking public engagement (cf. Watermeyer 2015).

We also identified inadvertently³ through the distribution of the survey that the majority of respondents were female, with many out-of-office replies indicating that the addressee was on maternity leave. Whilst, it is not our intention nor do we have sufficient scope in this article to further consider the gendered dimension of PE working cultures within HE contexts, we recognize that this is an important dimension that requires further consideration.

Securing the future of PE?

In considering the future landscape of PE in UK HE, respondents volunteered a number of albeit similar suggestions of what they conjectured to be necessary in securing its legacy as a (legitimate) university mission. Within these suggestions, respondents stressed the importance of collaboration and a more inter-fused multi-stakeholder response both at an individual level between researchers and university PE support staff and at an institutional level, between universities and external public-facing organisations:

It has to be about exceptional partnerships - For the public to have excellent experiences it must be done in collaboration: with theatres, museums, galleries, NGOs, broadcasters, games makers and equally, at times, with amateurs and hobbyists, involving the public themselves. Public engagement is about the society we want to be part of and to help create. (E21)

³ Gender was not a component of the survey's participant profiling.

They also suggested that for PE to become a more visible and integral part of research practice it would need to be formalized and incentivized as a part of academics' performance review processes:

For PE to become more embedded in universities and research, it needs to be included in PDR [performance development review] or annual appraisals of research staff and for them to be recognised and rewarded. (E22)

Respondents also pointed to a need for explicit reporting and auditing of PE activity in the context of research grant awards and suggested that where researchers had not fulfilled their PE obligations, funders could rightfully demand a return of funds:

Funders need to actually pay attention to whether the public engagement activities mentioned in grants were actually done, and if not, ask for some of the grant money back. There is also an issue of quality - public engagement is a professional skill. To do it well, experts (communicators) need to work alongside researchers to ensure quality and evaluate it fully. (E23)

The role of PE experts was seen as central to the future of PE particularly in REF terms, where respondents imagined the future role of PE support staff as 'impact brokers', mobilizing and ameliorating an institution's REF impact submission. Nonetheless, it was felt that PE support staff would require the financial backing and contribution-in-kind of their institutions to effectively deliver on this impact-focused role:

If 'impact' is going to be a large part of REF2020, then those engagement professionals need to be properly funded and supported to do their roles properly. I think that in the future such individuals could be thought of as "impact multipliers" who massively increase the impact of research on end users and researchers alike. (E24)

Grassroots development of PE core skills was also recommended by respondents as a formal part of postgraduate and undergraduate curricula. We might then infer that early-stage knowledge and skill-building for students might also help to cement a PE consciousness among their tutors and concurrently, therefore, in a pedagogical context, open up alternative avenues for deliberating the significance of PE. One respondent in particular, represented in E25, advocated for direct action in exploiting UK HE's investment in PE that might move it beyond supporting and talking to full systemic integration:

If we manage to put the right kinds of support and training into place and focus on building PE into academic programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, it is possible to change the culture little by little . . . The question is whether we (in the UK) can capitalise on the fact that our funding councils have been in the vanguard in this respect. If so, the UK could become a leading light in actually doing PER (as opposed to being a leading light in policy and support for PER which it is at the minute). (E25)

Discussion

Whilst we are cognizant of the cost implications and funding requirements of PE, we detect within respondents' accounts a tension between the value of PE being reified by the availability and provision of dedicated funding streams and the economization of PE or more precisely, the value of PE being adjudged solely in economic terms. In the latter case, we perceive PE as being yet another part of the academic portfolio and aspect of university life, much like teaching and research, to be fiscally rationalized and, therefore, operationalized on the basis of performance management. Yet this is a trend we have observed not only in an HE but policy context and from the unique perspective of having conducted evaluations of public dialogues for policy purposes (cf. Watermeyer and Rowe 2013, 2014, 2016) where a pre-set evaluative criterion of value for money is standard. This kind of monetarization of the value of PE is, however, to our mind not only reductionist but short-sighted, in so much as any justification formed on a cost-benefit analysis will likely be only conjectural and prone to missing more profound yet less tangible or less easily articulated benefits. It also, however, confirms a fear of universities being led to focus on aspects of their portfolio that are most efficiently measured (cf. Olmos-Peñuela, Benneworth and Castro-Martinez 2013).

Where the justification for PE is made on the basis of academics' securing research funding or high evaluative scores in a system of national research assessment, its current and future state and status appears inseparably bound with HE's neoliberalization and the inescapability of academics from a 'competition fetish'. The professionalization of PE and its operationalization by HE administrators or 'para-academics' (Macfarlane 2011; see also Watermeyer 2015a) also suggests its 'unbundling' (Kinser 2002) from the academic portfolio. So while, there are assertions of a move towards 'engaged research' (Holliman and Holti 2014; Hill/National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement 2014) we might claim a shift away from the idea of the 'engaged researcher' where the function of PE is primarily in servicing the organizational and evidence needs of impact for funding and impact for REF, which might be most (cost)effectively undertaken by impact 'administrative' specialists. Of course, there are those who might challenge this interpretation and justifiably point towards REF impact case studies as evidence of the way with which researchers – certainly those operating within more applied or public-interfacing disciplinary contexts – are 'engaged'. Whilst we sympathize with such a view and are able to self-reflect on our own position as researchers working within a disciplinary context that is inherently public facing, we would caution against an assumption that just because researchers are *involved* with public groups they are automatically *engaged* with public groups. Such an assumption, to our mind, fails to capture the nuance in the researcher/public interface and certainly, variable gradations of emotional investment in becoming an 'engaged researcher'. Consequently, whilst we might hope that the majority of researchers who *involve* the public in their research *engage* the public in their research, we suspect that frequently such engagement is felt to be a task more 'usefully' undertaken by administrators or early career researchers.

Such a shift also denotes that despite divergence in the types of roles declared by respondents, their institutional function is becoming, perhaps unknowingly, more narrowly defined and homogenized. Concurrently, it appears not all that surprising that their suggestions for ameliorating the future of PE in HE are bounded to a rationalization of PE as a lever of positional goods such as career advancement and research income and prestige. What is patently missing from respondents' recommendations and future imaginings though, is any sense of the potential of PE decoupled from research governance. Our respondents' perhaps unconscious and unguided drift towards this specific interpretation and imagining of PE raises questions beyond the scope of this study to do with the extent to which the professional service role in PE in universities is exclusive to the amelioration of the research environment; particularly as it is understood and valued in the terms of performance evaluation. Moreover, we recommend further research that analyses potential differences in interpretations (and implementations) of the future of PE as might exist between professional service and academic staff operating across different kinds of universities and in different locales, which ultimately might also include a focus across other national HE sectors. Closer examination of the way PE is represented as either a form of or route to impact in the context of REF2014 impact case studies is also necessary in determining the extent of diversity in types of PE activity pursued by different researchers, disciplines and ultimately universities and also how plans for PE might change or remain the same in future REF impact submissions.

Conclusion

For now, we are left to speculate on two highly polarized future imaginings for PE in UK universities and more broadly in other national contexts. In the first imagining we perceive a danger that the potential for academics to practice social responsibility and public citizenship through a plurality of diverse external engagements will recede and be cauterized by an urgency to expedite narrow predetermined impacts. In this situation, the kinds of communicative and relational freedoms attributed to PE may erode in tandem with the deepening of its institutionalization. In the second imagining we perceive almost an opportunity for regulatory mechanisms like the REF to open-up the potential for more diverse associations and applications of knowledge through PE and concomitantly greater inventiveness, ingenuity, freedom and movement in PE practice, where academics with the help of professional PE support staff attempt to inveigle the favour of performance assessors.

These two disparate imaginings are also indicative of the kinds of challenges and tensions, particularly those that exist between policy and practice in UK HE, affecting the mission and governance of universities at a time of unprecedented change for the sector. They also suggest the possibility and perhaps even the (co)existence already of two synchronous, non-exclusive realities of UK HE. The first reality is the homogenization of the academic portfolio and institutional governance becoming increasingly isomorphic, as the various missions of universities become ever more bound to and restricted by a common denominator of institutional performance. The second reality is of the potential for universities to affect genuine social change, where a greater focusing and investment in PE – albeit primarily in the terms of REF

– enables better technologies; better external collaborations; greater expertise and professionalization; greater bravery; and greater commitment to PE as a core institutional mission.

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